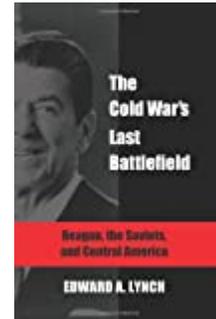


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Reviewed by Thomas R. Maddux (CSU Northridge)

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Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

Ronald Reagan and the Central American Conflict

The "American Lake" in the Caribbean and Central America erupted with Marxist and leftist challenges to long-term authoritarian regimes in the late 1970s and to the United States under the leadership of both Presidents Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. Carter responded first with an unsuccessful effort to find a viable middle ground between traditional oligarchical-military rule and the leftist insurgencies that looked to Fidel Castro and Castro's Soviet patron for support. El Salvador began to erupt after the 1972 election in which the military denied victory to a coalition led by José Napoleón Duarte of the Christian Democratic Party. When the military launched a wave of repression against moderates, guerrilla organizations launched expanding operations with support from popular organizations of peasants, workers, students, and Catholic Church leaders. The long-term Somoza regime in Nicaragua, currently under the leadership of Anastasio Somoza Debayle, also began to face serious challenges following an earthquake in 1972 and mounting opposition from such leaders as Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, who was assassinated in 1978, and

the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), which had emerged in 1961 in response to Castro's success in Cuba. Somoza launched a wave of terror in a failed effort to wipe out the FSLN, and the Sandinistas successfully reached out to the moderate opposition. In July 1979, Somoza went into exile and a provisional government with a five-member junta took over in Managua. A few months earlier on the island of Grenada, in the Windward Islands at the southern entrance to the Caribbean, a group of radicals led by Maurice Bishop and his New Jewel Movement overthrew the authoritarian regime of Sir Edward M. Gairy and looked to Castro for support. In 1980 in Suriname, on the northern coast of South America east of Venezuela, Desi Bouterse led a group of army sergeants to overthrow the elected government, and by 1982 Bouterse had executed some leading citizens and appeared to be aligning with Bishop and Castro.[1]

Edward A. Lynch approaches the Reagan administration's response to the Central American conflict as both a participant in the Reagan White House and as a political scientist at Hollins University. After working as an

analyst at the Heritage Foundation, Lynch entered the White House's Office of Public Liaison in December 1983 as a consultant on Central America and specialized in giving talks to visiting delegations on Central America and drafting newsletter contributions to the *White House Digest* on aspects of the Central American debate in the United States. Lynch experienced a good deal of frustration in getting the State Department to review and sign off on his reports and ended up completing only seven issues of the *Digest* during his thirteen months of service in the White House. While in his position, he gained an inside perspective on the never-ending conflicts within the Reagan administration, especially those concerned with policy on Nicaragua.

Lynch uses public U.S. documents, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library sources, newspaper articles, and some secondary sources. However, Lynch does not include citations for quotations from any of his sources, a bibliography, or footnotes to support his assessments, especially those concerning his thesis on the conflict within the administration, offering the explanation that it is far less confusing to most readers, and far more conducive to an appealing narrative to omit footnotes (p. xiv). Lynch's approach, however, limits the usefulness of his study to scholars and undermines the persuasiveness of several of his major themes.

Lynch endorses Reagan's assessment of the Central American challenge to the United States as a top-down threat from the Soviet Union: "Reagan believed that the Soviet Union, working mostly through Cuba, had taken a strong interest in Central America and was determined to use the conflicts in the region to weaken, and possibly threaten the United States" (pp. viii-ix). According to Lynch, Reagan considered El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Grenada as opening challenges in his desire to roll back the advance of the Soviet Union and Communism: "Must we let ... Grenada, Nicaragua, El Salvador, all become additional Cubas, new outposts for Soviet brigades?" (p. 60). The clear emphasis of Reagan, which Lynch endorses, was on a Soviet priority to weaken the United States in its own backyard, and once Communist allies were entrenched in Nicaragua and El Salvador to move on the other Central American states and ultimately threaten Mexico. The Soviet Union through the 1980s provided aid to the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua, insurgents in El Salvador, and Bishop in Grenada, just as it supported leftist regimes in Angola and Ethiopia and elsewhere. Recent studies on Soviet policy, however, suggest growing disillusionment with a number of these new allies by the 1980s, even if Soviet officials on the

scene kept pushing for more resources to help build reliable Communist states and to take advantage of revolutionary situations.[2]

What the Reagan administration downplayed, with Lynch's agreement, were the domestic sources for the conflicts in Central America as decaying oligarchies aligned with military allies to maintain dominance over peasants and growing urban middle and working classes. Several studies have emphasized that this conflict reaches back to the Mexican Revolution, a conflict between the Left and the Right with violence on both sides. Rightists and oligarchs aligned with the military resorted to violence when popular sectors of society moved to organize and gain political influence and opportunities for their supporters. While Lynch recognizes the ensuing violence and its impact on El Salvador and Nicaragua (he could also have mentioned Guatemala, which is not covered in the book), he minimizes its significance, particularly in influencing American opinion and congressional views against the policies of the Reagan administration on the Central American conflicts.[3]

Lynch offers a favorable assessment of President Reagan's policies toward Central America, including the U.S. intervention in Grenada in 1983 to rescue American medical students before they became hostages as the New Jewel Movement collapsed after the murder of Bishop. Despite considerable disagreement within the Reagan administration and substantial public and congressional concerns about the United States getting involved in another conflict like Vietnam in El Salvador, Reagan sent a limited number of military advisors to assist the El Salvadorian army and obtained increasing amounts of military aid from Congress. As Lynch emphasizes, "on El Salvador, the argument within the administration was over the best means for obtaining a similar end," that of preventing a Communist victory (p. 87). Reagan faced more difficulties on Nicaragua, with disputes among his leading foreign policy advisors and shifting opposition from Democrats in Congress, which produced a "war" in Washington. Lynch is critical of Reagan for his inability to manage the conflict among his advisors, and for his approval of a covert program of aid to an anti-Sandinista force, labeled the "Contras" by the Sandinistas, versus a public program that, Lynch suggests, went against Reagan's own instincts: "Reagan saw guerrillas fighting a Communist government as forces for freedom and had a hard time understanding why his advisors did not want him to talk about it" (p. 88). As Lynch emphasizes, Reagan did not offer a public rationale for supporting the Contras until May 1984, although Lynch does

suggest that Washington realized that Honduras, a necessary base/sanctuary for the Contras, insisted on "plausible deniability" with respect to its involvement (p. 108).

The Reagan administration's maneuvering with Congress on Nicaragua and aid to the Contras takes up a significant portion of Lynch's study. Lynch examines the first Boland amendment in 1982, introduced by Representative Edward Boland (Democrat from Massachusetts) to limit aid to the Contras to the interdiction of arms to the El Salvadorian insurgents, through the Iran Contra affair and final negotiations in 1987-88. Lynch admits that the White House took a risky position of accepting the amendment even as Reagan and the conservatives wanted to get rid of the Sandinistas. When CIA involvement in the mining of harbors in Nicaragua emerged in April 1984, a prolonged battle led to another Boland amendment in October that banned the use of governmental funds by the CIA, the Defense Department, and any U.S. intelligence agency to support the Contras. Lynch implies that Reagan should have vetoed the legislation for "with the stroke of his pen, Reagan could have avoided the scandal that nearly destroyed his presidency" (p. 169). By June 1985, the White House had moved from defeat to gain approval of twenty-seven million dollars in nonmilitary aid and initiated plans to regain military assistance.

To keep the Contras as a viable force, Reagan had also asked his cabinet and National Security Council (NSC) to find aid for the Contras through legal means until he could persuade Congress to resume funding. Since the NSC was not specifically named in the Boland amendment, Richard McFarlane, the NSC advisor, and enterprising staff members like Oliver North went to work soliciting private funds, diverting funds from the trading of arms for hostages with Iran, and creating a private group called "The Enterprise" to get arms and funds to the Contras. "Reagan should have known better," concludes Lynch, who points to the president's management style and his failure to have a responsible official overseeing aid to the Contras to make sure that his administration was staying within the law (pp. 214).

Lynch devotes considerable attention to the internal conflict within the Reagan administration throughout the 1980s over policy toward El Salvador initially and then Nicaragua. Although Lynch recognizes that many factors shaped the conflict, such as personality clashes, different views on what tactics and strategy would be successful, and institutional, bureaucratic conflicts, he highlights throughout the study the clash between a prefer-

ence for natural allies versus leveraged allies. Foreign policy elites, according to Lynch, strove for leveraged allies, leaders and states dependent on the United States for various forms of assistance and willing to defer to U.S. wishes. Lynch considers the Somoza dictators to be good example of this relationship. Natural allies represented economically prosperous and democratic states that would align with each other and the United States without having to be in a state of dependency. Lynch puts Secretary of State George Schultz and the Department of State in the leveraged camp and Reagan and his conservative advisors in the natural camp.

Lynch emphasizes this concept throughout his study. He discusses bureaucratic interests and the defense of prerogatives in such cases as the persistent conflict between the NSC and State Department on managing policy as well as the nature of the policy itself. However, Lynch's thesis is weakened by the absence of citations and some of his unsupported assertions on this issue. An example of Lynch's unsupported speculation appears in a discussion regarding McFarlane not being concerned about a Communist Nicaragua since the "danger from Nicaragua could force its neighbors to accept dependence on the United States as a necessary evil" (p. 83). Lynch poses the natural ally camp that wanted to free Nicaragua from Sandinista control with William Clark, an NSC advisor; Jeane Kirkpatrick, UN ambassador; the CIA director, William Casey; and the NSC specialist on Latin American, Constantine Menges, against State Department leaders, such as Thomas O. Enders, assistant secretary of state for Inter-American Affairs, 1981-83, along with Schultz and several of his special negotiators. The latter figure is a major target for Lynch who asserts that Schultz wanted to make "sure that the U.S.-funded Contras did not win" and that "they were, at most, a way of stopping arms shipments to El Salvador and a lever for bringing the Sandinistas to the bargaining table" (p. 114).

When the Contadora group of Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, and Panama initiated a peace process in January 1984, the Reagan administration faced another challenge to its scrambling campaign to maintain congressional funding for the Contras, which created a new source of conflict among Reagan's advisors. Schultz supported the negotiations, as opposed to various conservatives and Lynch himself who argues that only force or economic collapse would have led the Sandinistas to negotiate. "Schultz and the leveraged ally faction," Lynch asserts, wanted containment of the Sandinistas versus Reagan who wanted the removal of the Sandinistas and assumed that free elections would produce this result (pp.

160-161). In his memoir, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State*, Schultz offers a contrasting view of his stance on Nicaragua and Washington's strategy in which he emphasizes military pressure on the Sandinistas, a negotiating track to reach an agreement if we could, and to maintain support from Congress and the United States's Central American allies, as well as Mexico, Colombia, and Venezuela.[4] Schultz found himself in a never-ending battle over Nicaragua with Clark and the NSC staff, especially Menges, who opposed his efforts at working on a joint approach to El Salvador and Nicaragua with Mexico. Clark tried to control negotiations on Central America and maneuvered approval of the CIA-assisted mining of Nicaraguan harbors around Schultz's objections. When McFarlane replaced Clark as NSC advisor, Schultz urged him to keep the NSC staff out of operations and focused on coordination. Schultz faced stubborn opposition to any negotiations with Daniel Ortega and the Sandinistas in Managua in June 1984 and sustained criticism against any follow-up talks from Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger; Casey of the CIA; and NSC staff members Oliver North, John Poindexter, and Menges. When Schultz obtained Reagan's agreement to move forward, Schultz discovered that the NSC staff had produced a National Security Decision Directive signed by Reagan that went against what Reagan had approved. By January 1985, Schultz recommended that the talks be suspended as Managua had backed away from any agreements that would comply with the Contadora agenda or Washington's demands.[5]

Lynch ably covers the endgame in Nicaragua from the creation of several plans for negotiations between the Sandinistas and Contras in August 1987 through the election in February 1990 in which, to the surprise of many observers and officials, Violetta Chamorro defeated Ortega. Lynch interweaves various plans including Reagan's agreement with the Democratic Speaker of the House James Wright that the external powers, the Soviet Union, Cuba, and the United States would suspend aid to the Sandinistas and Contras and in return the Sandinistas would restore all civil rights and liberties in Nicaragua and initiate preparations for a supervised election. The Reagan-Wright plan was similar to what President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica had proposed and which was supported by the other Central American presidents. Lynch fairly evaluates the maneuvering on all sides, from conservatives who denounced Reagan for giving up on a successful march by the Contras into Managua to kick the Sandinistas out, to Reagan's concerns about Democrats cutting off all funding for the Contras and undermining

their pressure on the Sandinistas, and to Ortega's scrambling efforts, in the face of declining Soviet and Cuban assistance, to keep the Contras and the civilian opposition in Nicaragua from uniting and defeating the Sandinistas.

The main weakness of Lynch's evaluation is his emphasis on the leveraged ally faction led by Secretary Schultz and bolstered by Reagan's successor George H. W. Bush and Secretary of State James Baker. In discussing the White House response to the Arias plan in August 1987, Lynch contrasts Reagan's determination to achieve democratization in Nicaragua to that of Schultz, who, according to Lynch, still favored containment of the Sandinistas and the leveraged ally faction that supposedly feared a Contra military victory. In contrast, Secretary Schultz in his memoir emphasizes both his close cooperation with Reagan to achieve a negotiated settlement that would lead to an election against the continuing resistance and the criticism of conservatives including his own Assistant Secretary Elliott Abrams and hard liners in Congress who wanted to continue military aid to the Contras and defeat the Sandinistas rather than trust Washington's involvement in the negotiating efforts led by Arias and the Central American leaders.[6] With respect to the final results in Nicaragua, Lynch continues the same critical emphasis on the leveraged ally faction that took over with Bush and Baker and made sure that Nicaragua would be economically dependent on the United States: "To save Nicaragua from Communism, which is what Reagan set out to do, he ended up surrendering it to the leveraged ally faction of his administration" (p. 284). Lynch views Chamorro's victory in 1990 and refusal to overturn Sandinista legislation and displace Humberto Ortega as head of the army as she maneuvered among the different political factions to avoid a resumption of military conflict as a final victory for the leveraged ally faction, since Nicaragua would remain an economic basket case, heavily dependent on U.S. aid, and with a president who would come to depend on U.S. officials to protect her from the frequent encroachments on her power by the Sandinista holdovers (p. 301).

In the *Cold War's Last Battlefield*, Lynch has provided a revisionist assessment of Reagan's policies toward El Salvador and Nicaragua that would have more credibility if he had examined the indigenous sources of the conflict as opposed to his endorsement of Reagan's top-down Cold War emphasis on Soviet and Cuban designs. The study would have been further improved by the inclusion of citations, especially those that would support Lynch's emphasis on the conflict between the natural ally and leveraged ally factions in the Reagan administration.

Notes

[1]. For the Central American background and Carter's response, see William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill, 1998), 10-72. Edgar F. Raines Jr. has the most documented study on Grenada in *The Rucksack War: U.S. Army Operational Logistics in Grenada, 1983* (Washington DC: Center of Military History, 2010). Secretary of State George Schultz discusses Suriname in *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993), 292-297; and Lynch reviews the Central American situation on pages 12-21.

[2]. See Jonathan Haslam, *Russia's Cold War: From the October Revolution to the Fall of the War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 315-317, 330-332, which emphasizes the role of Cuba as a conduit for Soviet aid after 1980 and leading supporter of the Sandinistas; and Vladislav M. Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 314, 331.

[3]. Several recent studies that explore the domestic conflicts in Latin America as well as the impact of U.S. policies include Greg Grandin and Gilbert M. Joseph, eds., *A Century of Revolution: Insurgent and Counterinsurgent Violence during Latin America's Long Cold War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Hal Brands, *Latin America's Long Cold War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); and Stephen G. Rabe, *The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[4]. Schultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 292.

[5]. *Ibid.*, 298-305, 410-428. Menges makes a similar complaint against State Department officials and Schultz that they did not follow Reagan's policy decisions and pursued their own approaches especially on Nicaragua. See Constantine C. Menges, *Inside the National Security Council: The True Story of the Making and Unmaking of Reagan's Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 94-96, 117-129, 151-166.

[6]. See Schultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 959-969.

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